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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

13 November 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Soviet Military Developments Over the Past Three Years

NOTE

The attached memorandum is a thought-provoking piece on general aspects of Soviet military capabilities. It sets forth an individual point of view, not a coordinated or Agency position. The author is one of our better and more experienced analysts of Soviet military affairs who was writing informally for internal distribution only. He shorthands some rather complex subjects, and reasons to some conclusions contrary to generally accepted notions about Soviet military capabilities, particularly the staying power of conventional forces. His thoughts are believed worth considering, if only for the purpose of exploring more deeply the questions posed.

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1. The Soviet military situation now is remarkably like it was three years ago. The basic problems are not changed. In the field of strategic attack and defense, the Soviets have changed the numerology of the situation, but have not altered the essentials of strategic balance. In the field of theater forces, the Soviets remain saddled with a structure designed for massive ground action in the midst of nuclear holocaust and lacking conventional staying power.

2. In mid-1965, the Soviets had acquired strategic forces adequate to deter the West from any rational nuclear attack on the Bloc and even to deter the West from responding to a conventional attack with nuclear weapons. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the United States had conceded the futility of first strike strategies -- counterforce, preemption, etc. -- as well as the automatic nuclear response in Europe. Objectively, the Soviets

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could have cut back on some of their strategic attack and defense programs in favor of a finite deterrence. Coupled with a negotiated freeze on further Western strategic systems, a cut back in these programs would have allowed a diversion of resources toward needed restoration of conventional war capabilities in Soviet general purpose forces.

3. However, a number of factors made the 1965-sized strategic forces unacceptable to the Soviet leadership and a change of emphasis impracticable. Some of these were:

a. The Soviet deterrent force was not nearly as impressive to Soviet leaders as it was to the West. With US military spokesmen voicing worry over vulnerability of the hardened, dispersed Minuteman systems, it is almost certain that Soviet military leaders were seriously concerned about the vulnerability of their relatively soft and bunched ICBM force. They also knew they were badly outclassed in the fields of bombers, air defense and seaborne systems. Further there were strong dissents in the Western camp to the notions of "mutual deterrence" and "non-nuclear response."

b. The Khrushchev emphasis on strategic missilery had developed its own momentum which would have resulted in

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growth and diversification of strategic forces for at least three or four years barring a set of drastic decisions by the new collective leadership.

c. The pressures from the Soviet marshals, while generally favoring traditional reliance on strong ground forces, were generally for "more of everything" rather than for reallocations within existing military outlays.

4. The size of Soviet strategic defensive and offensive forces which have evolved over the past three years were almost certainly dictated by strategic or political goals first set in the Khrushchev era. The Soviet offensive and defensive systems now operational and under construction may represent an early 60's view of adequate deterrent or hoped-for strategic superiority. If meaningful strategic weapons superiority was ever the Soviet goal, the idea was nearly bankrupted by the swift US deployment of 1,000 Minuteman missiles. Nonetheless, in 1965 the Soviets still had two basic military options open in strategic force structuring -- they could be content with a deterrent or strive for a war-winning first strike capability. These options are still open, but war-winning capabilities for either side have verged on the impossible for many years. To "prevail" in a general nuclear

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war the Soviets would have to devise a combination of highly reliable and accurate offensive and defensive systems which would limit destruction to the USSR to acceptable proportions. If heavy reliance were placed on preemptive strikes, the weapons involved would not only have to be highly accurate, they would have to somehow strike their targets nearly simultaneously and without providing even one minute's warning. Missile and bomber defenses would have to be widespread and nearly infallible, protecting against deliberate upwind "fallout" attack as well as direct attack. Even in the unlikely event that the Soviets could see a clear path through this maze of interlocking current problems, they would, in addition, have to convince themselves that technology and force development on the US side would stand still while this dream force was being developed and assembled. That the Soviets would strive for such a strategic goal appears no less preposterous today than in 1965.

5. After a decade of evidence to the contrary, it seems incongruous that serious intelligence officers could still promote the notion of a Soviet drive for "war-winning" strategies and forces. Nevertheless we still see the tendency to promote a theoretical technological development into a delivery technique,

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thence to a Soviet weapon system, thence to a tactic, and finally to a "strategy" from which a "force goal" can be derived. In 1965 the technique was the "100-megaton black out;" in 1968 it is "pin-down." These technical possibilities no doubt deserve consideration, but the tendency is now, as it has been to pressure the intelligence community to base forecasts on the "state of the art" rather than on demonstrated Soviet ability to turn technology into military capability.

6. Still looking at the Soviet forces from the point of view of basic military options then, there remains only deterrence. There is nothing in the last three years' developments which should be taken as a clear sign that the Soviets have elected to go beyond deterrence as a strategy. Fancy warheads and unusual trajectories for ICBM's are prudent reactions to the possible degradation of deterrence through ABM defenses. (This possibility was ostensibly the cause for similar action on our side.) As for total numbers of launchers, we have no real measure of the Soviet view of "adequacy." The size force now being deployed is well within the range of traditionally conservative Soviet military views of requirements, especially when one considers -- as the Soviets must -- that soft launchers will be retired

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eventually. Further, there is plenty of room for doubt that the Soviet view of their missile systems' reliability is the same as ours.

7. To sum up the purely military aspects of Soviet strategic force development, a surge toward some sort of "war-winning" force is just as unsupportable in evidence and in logic as it was in 1965, and there is no firm evidence against the remaining military option of pure deterrence.

8. There is another option, however, which though militarily inane, could have great appeal politically and economically. That is the "rough parity" force. The internal and external political advantages of an accepted parity need not be belabored here. But if economic considerations loom as large as they must, the Soviets would probably have envisioned some tacit or formal arms control agreements to follow their accomplishment of "parity." Otherwise the competition involved in merely staying even would perpetuate or even accelerate military spending.

9. At this juncture, there is some evidence to support the "parity" force structure proposition. The current deployment of ICBM's would result in about a thousand hard launchers and appears

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to be tapering off. The Soviet ballistic missile submarine program also appears to be moving toward a rough parity with our Polaris force. Couple these developments with Soviet pre-Czechoslovakia moves toward arms agreements and the case for parity-plus-negotiations-to-maintain-parity looks pretty good. If we can take recent Soviet statements and actions as attempts to keep US-Soviet arms control channels open despite the Czech crisis, the "parity" case is even better.

10. A "parity" force goal could have been set by the Soviets any time after the US announcement of force goals, ie., in the Khrushchev era. The land-based missile programs at least through the SS-11 deployment, must have been pretty firm prior to the demise of Khrushchev. The SS-13 program thus far lacks the brisk purposefulness of the other programs, perhaps reflecting the lack of clear-cut decisions of a Khrushchev. At any rate, the "tired arm" aspects of current Soviet missile deployment and testing activity indicates the probable fruition of programs laid down five years or so ago, without subsequent hard decisions regarding overall force structure.

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11. If, as it seems, the Soviets are now running out a "Khrushchev string" in the strategic missile business, the leadership is now faced with the problem of hard military decisions in their own right. In addition to the claims of the civilian economy, the collective will have to deal with the delayed claims of the Soviet marshals. In 1964-1965, these venerables were quite apparently decrying Khrushchev's neglect of Soviet theater forces. Until last year the marshals muted their hue and cry about conventional capabilities despite the absence of basic improvements in the Soviet ground and tactical air armies. This indicates a post-Khrushchev mollification of the marshals by the collective. It is unlikely that the marshals were content with the mere suspension of Khrushchevian polemics against troops and tanks. More likely they were persuaded to wait -- probably until about now, when the strategic nuclear problem was "solved." The marshals may now present their claims against resources to cure the ills of the theater forces, and the claims can be staggeringly high.

12. The chief weakness in theater forces -- a lack of conventional staying power -- is illustrated by the now-standard Warsaw Pact scenario for war in Europe. NATO fights conventionally

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for three or four days and then resorts to nuclear weapons. These are the same three or four days it takes for committed Pact units to deplete their fuel and conventional ammunition supplies.

13. We have noted the extreme austerity of the Soviet logistics systems for at least five years in NIE's. In East Germany, where the best supported Soviet forces are stationed, the division slice back through front (army group) is some 14,000 men, about one-quarter of a comparable US troop slice. The difference is not due in significant degree to the "luxurious living style" of US forces, as often asserted. It is due to a deliberate decision of the Soviets some 15 years ago to place all their bets on very brief nuclear war in Europe.

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14. Another severe drawback in Soviet conventional capability is the relative weakness of their tactical aviation, also noted for several years in national estimates. The basic reason for this is that the Soviet tactical air commanders have had to content themselves with a share of the aircraft developed for strategic air defense, not for support of theater forces. Tactical aircraft, with the exceptions of the obsolete Beagle light bomber and a few Brewer light bombers are all interceptors, although some are modified for ground attack roles. As a result they have poor

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range and load-carrying characteristics.

When comparisons are made with more realistic combat mission profiles (e.g., low altitude) and between other NATO and Soviet tactical aircraft, the imbalance in favor of NATO is even more pronounced. Further, in purely numerical terms, NATO has more tactical aircraft than does the Warsaw Pact.

15. These weaknesses in tactical air offensive capability are compounded by Soviet weakness in theater air defenses. The main problem here is low-altitude defenses. Warsaw Pact radars are poor at detecting aircraft

Even if sufficient detection and

tracking information were available, it appears that the Soviet control system would be saturated by simultaneous NATO sorties, that is it can handle about

sorties or flights at one time if all men and machines operate at maximum efficiency. The poor low altitude capability of Soviet

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interceptors and SAMs add to the problem. That leaves much of the low-altitude defense up to AAA guns. We know from SE Asia that they can take a toll of aircraft, but NATO loss rates to guns would have to far exceed those experienced in Vietnam to greatly affect the course of conventional air warfare in Europe.

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17. Of course, if a war should start with the Soviets employing their MRBM/IRBM and medium bomber force against NATO, austere logistic support and the tactical air and theater air defense

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equation would be of little importance. This scenario for war in Europe was the keystone of Soviet doctrine for many years, and the basic reason for the weakness of their forces for conventional warfare.

18. All this points up the critical nature of a realistic assessment of the conventional war capabilities of the Warsaw Pact. Except for those few in the intelligence community who believe that the Soviets are bent on acquiring a capability to impose their will on us with superior strategic forces, the question of Pact conventional capabilities should be the paramount concern of military intelligence. If the Soviets are now confident of their nuclear deterrent, as we judge them to be, they will calculate the risks involved in military adventures and other power plays largely against relative conventional capabilities. If this is not now the case, it is almost certainly the trend.

19. Fortunately for the West, Soviet military men are well aware of their conventional shortcomings and are likely to oppose actions which risk a NATO conventional military response. Since 1960 they have been beating the drum for improved non-nuclear capabilities. NATO's problems will truly become acute when and if the Soviet marshals can pry loose the resources to

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correct the problem. If the currently accepted view of Soviet conventional prowess remains intact, what will be the NATO reaction to sharp improvement?

20. Such sharp improvements may occur over the next few years. If the marshals still want a sustained conventional capability, the theater force support structure must be greatly expanded. As a minimum, the marshals can today claim a need to replace the Czech theater forces with reliable Soviet ground and tacair units. If the marshals are carrying IOU's against the rest of the leadership coming due about now, there will be additional heavy pressure to deemphasize the strategic forces in favor of improved theater force conventional capabilities.

21. Overall, it seems that three years of effort have not provided the Soviets with a militarily meaningful gain in the East-West balance. Their strategic forces still constitute a finite deterrent. Their ABM defenses still consist of an incomplete deployment at Moscow. Their theater forces remain too light and too poorly supported for a conventional war and incompletely equipped for nuclear war. But now it seems that the Soviets are really at the crossroads. The uproar over military affairs died down after Khrushchev's demise, but it will probably erupt again soon. The

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contestants will face the old questions of strategic forces vs. theater forces; nuclear capabilities vs. non-nuclear capabilities, and the economy in general vs. military expenditures. Those spokesmen for larger and better theater forces are likely to hold the high trump. The Czech crisis provides convincing evidence that the East European empire is a consumer rather than a provider of theater forces. This fact plus the hostility of China will enhance the marshals' arguments for more and better theater forces. The tension arising from the Czech affair will also provide ammunition for proponents of continued heavy emphasis on strategic weapons. Their arguments will be hard to counter unless arms control agreements appear likely. Thus we may see a considerable body of Soviet military opinion favoring strategic arms control as a means of diverting resources to meet theater force requirements.

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